
The BEM Document in Romanian Orthodox Theology: The Present Stage of Discussions

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THE BEM DOCUMENT (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Convergence in the Faith) presented at Lima in 1982, has been received with much interest by theologians in Romania, even with a certain degree of enthusiasm and with optimistic expectations. It was examined at three *interconfessional conferences* (at Sibiu on May 18, 1978—the Accra version of 1974, and on May 17, 1984 and November 27, 1984—the Lima text) and by several though not many theologians who wrote about it.

The theme has somehow taken many by surprise and the feeling of surprise still persists. One would say: *It is too nice to be true!* and on the other hand: *It is too daring to get used to it at once!* After so many centuries of separation, suddenly before us stands a surprising, almost unbelievable formula of unity, particularly so as it comes from the Protestants. These were responses given at the first reading of the text. After a second reading, our theologians have compared their Orthodox faith with the the proposals put forward by the document and after examining them have discovered the differences which still persist. Nobody could agree with what the document *changes, innovates* and *interprets* in ways different from one's own traditional interpretation. Nevertheless, all have seen an invitation to reflection coming out of the formulas of the document and have expressed their hope that these formulas will be deepened both in the light of their common theological tradition—the one prior to the separation—and in the light of possible reinterpretations of the post-separation traditions of the confessions engaged in dialogue.

In what follows we shall attempt to make an assessment of the present stage of discussions on the BEM document in Romanian theology.

In fact, the first thing which gave rise to difficulties was the term *convergence* in the title of the document. What does *convergence* in matters of faith and doctrine mean? How far can convergence which is not identity go? What does convergence imply? Does it imply a common faith expressed in different formulas? Or on the contrary: a common formula for an article of faith but having different contents? These seem to be of both kinds. Since there are many ambiguities in the language of the document, the suggested convergences must be studied one by one, clarified, and then put forward for agreement. No step further can be taken before a clarification of and agreement on the language.

Theologians in Romania have not yet studied all the problems which raise such difficulties. One that has been debated refers to the term *Ministry* in the title of the document. What does it mean for the Orthodox and what does it mean for the Protestants? Does it mean the same thing? Does it have the same content? At a superficial and very general look the answer would be: yes. But when one proceeds to define concretely its content, he finds that the Orthodox give it one meaning, while the Protestants another. The translator of the document into Romanian was, naturally, confronted with this difficulty. After consultation with other theologians and even with several hierarchs, it was decided to translate *Ministry* (or *Ministere* in the French version) with *Slujire* (Service). The reason given for the selection of that term was that in a Protestant understanding and in the meaning given it by the authors of the document, *Ministry* is not limited to a sacerdotal priesthood, one based on ordination and apostolic succession, but it is more encompassing, containing also the priesthood of the believers and the social diaconia. This is exactly what *Ministry* means: ministerium, service. The Romanian translator wanted to give a faithful rendering of the word as it is currently understood by Protestants. It remains to be seen whether or not he made the right choice. But it is not the meaning of *Ministry* as service which interests us. We think that we have dialogued and must continue to dialogue in the document about *the sacrament of priesthood* and not about service in general. The Protestants may believe that we approve of their "priesthood" as Orthodox priesthood, when we actually approve only of their service in general in the form of preaching, missionary action and charitable institutions, etc. Our theologians have stated that on service in general we can easily agree. Things change when we come to the aspect of *Ministry* as priesthood. Convergence on this aspect must be defined as such and beyond any ambiguity.

Priesthood is not only diminished by the term *Ministry*, but also totally counterfeited. It is something else. Something that stems from

the general mandate of all Christians, or from the mandate of a community and not from a sacramental institution. In that case, as has been noted by some theologians, *Baptism* and *Eucharist* would also be greatly shadowed since they would be performed by a non-sacramental priesthood.

In general, sacramental priesthood is not sufficiently dealt with in the document. Discussion on that issue took up a good part of the interconfessional conference held in Bucharest on November 27, 1984. If we acknowledge *Ministry* to be equal with *Slujire* (Service) we can agree with the text and can easily achieve convergence with the Protestants, but then we would not speak about *the sacrament of priesthood* but about something totally different. Such convergences would be false convergences. It has therefore been required to first clarify the terms that are being used in the document. If we stick to *Ministry*, a term with such a wide range of connotations in the languages of the West and with a certain degree of ambiguity even in those languages, the term would have to be very clearly defined *even for Westerners*, so that they may know about what they are actually talking, and avoid furthering false convergences. The term *Ministry*, for example, could also encompass, in its broader meaning, the so-called ministry of women, on which a convergence could finally be reached, but if we speak about priesthood as sacrament, the service of women is no longer part of the term.

A clarification of terms is also a question of honesty. False impressions should be avoided. Convergence, when it is achieved, must be a real convergence. Otherwise, it would not reach farther than a conference room. It would not be received since the people of God would not receive ambiguous formulas.

One of the interconfessional conferences in Romania dealt also with the problem of *reception*. As it stands now, as a text on which convergence is to be reached—since it is not yet a text of convergence—the BEM document cannot be forwarded for reception by the churches in the sense in which the items of faith have been received in history. There is an impropriety about the term *reception* as it is being used in BEM. The document is subject to *discussion*, not to reception. We can talk about its authentic reception *only* after it has been given a definitive form and it has been accepted at a pan-Orthodox level, if we would reach that stage, and if our Protestant and Roman Catholic partners would also subscribe to the same text.

A request for its reception *now* would mean to anticipate *yes* and *no* responses as in a referendum. But this cannot be asked even from a conference or a symposium. The document is being discussed now in view not of its reception but of its improvement, and in order to methodically achieve a step by step, chapter by chapter convergence.

Reception will follow in the end and will be achieved through well-known and historically validated means, so that any discussion of it now would be premature.

I have mentioned these things here since they took up a good part of the discussions on BEM in the interconfessional conferences in Romania.

The Romanian Orthodox theologians have also proceeded to do an analysis of the document itself.

1. With respect to Baptism they have discovered many points of convergence but have nevertheless also noticed a few ambiguous sentences, which, if worked out, would gain greater clarity. Not all of the latter pertain to fundamental doctrinal issues. Several theologians have come up with more serious objections. They regard the term *sign* used in relation to baptism as not being a good choice. There are *signs* also in the Orthodox Church's baptism. The water, oil, the ritual gestures can be *signs, symbols*, but baptism is not just a symbol. It is also a sacrament, an incorporation into Christ, therefore something greater and of a different nature. BEM also speaks of an "incorporation" into the Body of Christ, but it does not properly connect *sign* with *incorporation*.

Our theologians have also found a certain openness towards the sacrament of chrismation, or confirmation, one that is greater than that existing in the Accra version (1974). Nevertheless, as it is being presented in the current text, the sacrament of chrismation is absorbed by the sacrament of baptism, which fact represents a divergence from the Orthodox doctrine.

In relation to Baptism, the document speaks about "the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth." Some Romanian theologians regard the use of this expression here as being inadequate, since it suggests a Bultmannian discontinuity between "Jesus of Nazareth" and "Christ the Lord."

2. With respect to Eucharist, appreciation has been expressed for the general importance given to the sacrament, as a sacrament, and for the recognition of its place in the center of Christian life and for salvation. Criticism has been voiced about the great emphasis on *justification* which is *external* and *forensic* as an act of *satisfaction* brought to the Father. The exclusive *memorial* character of the Eucharist has also been disapproved of since the emphasis is actually on *anamnesis*. Others have spoken critically about the fact that there is here an understanding of the sinner as becoming through the Eucharist a *justified sinner*, and therefore not completely restored, not being the subject of an ontological transformation which makes him not a *justified sinner* but a new, a renewed creature. Criticism was also expressed about the fact that although the document speaks of a real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, the theory of impanation (*in pane, cum*

(*pane, sub pane*) still persists. The bread and wine remain sacramental signs of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Objections have also been raised with respect to a lack of relation between eucharist and confession which if present here could lead to consensus on the sacrament of penance.

Roman Orthodox theologians believe that is possible to overcome these shortcomings through greater clarity and through a balancing of the document with the help of correct Orthodox statements which are abundantly present in the text. This is possible since the document does not omit the Orthodox affirmation of faith, but in order to also satisfy the Protestants, it attempts to make adjustments commensurate with certain Protestant theories. Even though it cannot remain in its present form, this document represents a praiseworthy ecumenical effort.

As in the case of Baptism, the use of the term *sign* in the text of BEM in relation to Eucharist is regarded as being ambiguous. More appropriate would be terms such as *element, matter, gesture*. These terms cannot be misinterpreted from a dogmatic point of view. As a matter of fact, the term *sign* is too frequently used throughout the document.

The statement according to which in the eucharist one receives “the assurance of the forgiveness of sins” is believed to be evasive. Why is it not stated more simply and in the words of the Scripture: “for the forgiveness of sins.” The same theologians, however, note with satisfaction the unambiguous affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. In this light, the addition of its meaning as *memorial* can be accepted. Any ambiguity about this term is removed by its translation into Romanian as *pomenire*.

According to some Romanian theologians, the role and action of the Holy Spirit has been insufficiently shown in BEM with respect to all the three sacraments. For example, they find BEM to follow the western tradition when affirming that the transformation of the gifts in the eucharist takes place when the words of institution are being uttered and not as is the case with us, through the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The Lord’s suffering, sacrifice, death and resurrection occurred *after* the institution of the eucharist at the Last Supper and therefore not when the words of institution were spoken. The eucharist is the presence of Christ who suffers, is sacrificed, dies and rises from the dead. *The Last Supper* and the above events were not concomitant. These problems are not elucidated in the fourteenth chapter of the Eucharist section of BEM on *the Eucharist as invocation of the Spirit*. The final part of the section on Eucharist has also been objected to by Romanian theologians since it ushers in “the obsolete formula of intercommunion” prior to the achievement of unity in the faith.

3. The chapter on Ministry also contains theses which are not accepted by Romanian theologians. They do not agree with the fact that at the ordination of a priest, room is also left for the instituting (ordaining) role of the community, even though the ordination performed by the bishop is acknowledged in the document.

The community is also present in the Orthodox ritual having to answer when the bishop asks if the candidate “is worthy,” but it is not the community that performs the ordination. Some theologians believe that if at the ordination the essential role of the bishop is acknowledged and maintained, the BEM text may be regarded as convergent in this respect.

Still others see in the text, which states that *the Church institutes the priesthood*, a new and veiled form of *the mandate of the community* for which reason they suggest that any ambiguity should be avoided.

Objections have also been raised about those passages in BEM which affirm that the churches that possess apostolic succession recognize continuity in apostolic faith, worship and missionary action to the churches that have not maintained an episcopate of apostolic succession. This would represent a lessening of the importance of apostolic succession. A reconciliation with us has been considered unacceptable in such conditions of ambiguity. “Continuity in apostolic faith” is different from “apostolic succession.” Otherwise it should be explicitly stated that they are one and the same thing. The general priesthood of the believers (1 Pet 2.5-9), as is known, is not rejected by the Orthodox, but when it comes to the realization of Christ in the sacrament, that is being done through the sacrament of priesthood. This also gives meaning to the “priesthood” of the believers.

It has therefore been concluded that the BEM document is still hesitant with respect to the priesthood, to “the ordained ministry” in contrast to that which is called “general.” For example, the document attempts to derive the ordained ministry, the sacramental priesthood, from the general priesthood of the believers. It says that the churches should take as starting point “the calling of the whole people of God.” But we rather start from Jn 15.16: “You did not choose me; I chose you.” That is why a theologian has written: “There is no question of a *priesthood* in BEM. Its sacramental aspect is undecipherable and the predominantly descriptive character of the text with its numerous consolidations of Protestant positions shows that a forthcoming common formulation of the theme is not in sight.”

Our theologians have objected to the opinion of the BEM document on the threefold form of the priesthood of which it says that it has not always been present in the Church, but has been the outcome of an evolution, and the Church has the ability to restructure it. We know that it was already present in the New Testament and in the

writings of the apostolic Fathers. The question of restructuring it could regard only the Protestants.

Objections have also been stated about the opinions on the ordination of women, which opinions are too vague and leave the impression that the Orthodox have introduced an innovation by leaving it aside in the course of history.

On the other hand, Romanian theologians have expressed satisfaction with the great progress achieved through the Lima text.

Evidently, as Professor Nikos Nissiotis warned, no one should try to find in BEM one's own confessional faith (Geneva, July 1982). But during the time in which we still discuss, all of us must judge from the standpoint of our own confession. Even afterwards the document would have to correspond to our own confession and we would expect of it *the miracle* of corresponding also to the conscience of our partners in dialogue as they themselves would expect of us the same miracle. That is why the document must be made to be *everybody's*, no matter how difficult that may be. It would have to be everybody's or nobody's. There is no other alternative. Only as such it would not give rise to any triumphalism.

As has been noticed, in this presentation I brought up only a few points of convergence and consensus noted by Romanian theologians. There are, however, many more. It would have been interesting to deal with them also, but I thought it more useful to present the objections. Convergences will stand out by themselves. Divergences must be pointed out in order to solve them together with our partners of other confessions. They themselves will undoubtedly communicate to us their own divergences. Those we will have to examine again and only then make good use of our convergences and defend them.

Generally speaking, the Romanian Orthodox theologians consider the BEM document to be a major step forward and a courageous expression of the desire and hope for unity of all Christians. (The present assessment has taken into consideration views on BEM expressed by: His Eminence Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu, Professors D. Stăniloae, I. Ică, I. Bria, D. Popescu, D. Radu, I. Fleca, Assistant Professor I. Sauca, Anca Manolache, and this speaker.)

For the answer to be sent to the World Council of Churches, the Romanian Patriarchate has set up a Commission made up of Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală of Transylvania, Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu of the Banat, and the following professors: Dumitru Stăniloae, Dumitru Radu, Constantin Galeriu and Stefan Alexe of Bucharest, Ioan Ică and Ioan Fleca of Sibiu. The Commission will present its observations to the fall 1985 session of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The conclusions of this conference will also be available and they will certainly be useful to us.



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